

Transboundary mine concerns continue

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Southeast Alaskans concerned about British Columbian mines under development in transboundary watersheds continue to push for the involvement of the International Joint Commission, which resolves international disputes between the United States and Canada under the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909.

“Southeast Alaska’s salmon won’t last forever, unless we fight to protect them. The upcoming months are a key time to ensure our message reaches high-level elected officials,” says a recent email from Salmon Beyond Borders, one of the organizations leading the charge.

Transboundary mines were a concern fishermen discussed at this week’s Alaska Young Fishermen’s Summit, both at a community event organized by Trout Unlimited prior to the summit and during the summit itself. Jan. 24, Sitka fisherman and writer Brendan Jones published an opinion piece about the issue in the New York Times. And organizations, municipalities, tribes and individuals continue to call for IJC involvement.

In a recent press release about the groups’ desire for IJC involvement, they acknowledge the state’s statement of cooperation with BC as “an important first step” but note that the new version itself says “the document itself is not intended to substitute for involvement of the International Joint Commission.”

In the release, Cynthia Wallesz, executive director of United Southeast Alaska Gillnetters, called for a formal comment period and public hearings “so the final SOC language can be publicly vetted.”

“We are encouraged to see the Walker administration has improved on the first draft of the SOC, particularly their recognition the SOC is limited in its ability to protect our waters and fisheries here in Alaska and in no way rejects federal government involvement through the Boundary Waters Treaty and the IJC. Leaving open the IJC option is the recognition we’ve been seeking,” said Petersburg mayor Mark Jensen.

“The first draft of the SOC was made public in mid-November. About a dozen comments were submitted, including a letter written by the Salmon Beyond Borders campaign signed by over 100 organizations, businesses and individuals. A revised draft was distributed by the State on January 21. The document now addresses the risks of large tailings dams and recognizes the need for transparency. However, the SOC still needs significant improvement in areas such as financial assurances, best practices and public participation,” the release says.

They also hope for the continued support and involvement of Alaska’s Congressional delegation.

“We need cooperation with the Federal governments and sovereign Tribal governments. Our international issue requires an international solution,” said Frederick Olsen, Jr., Vice President of the Organized Village of Kasaan and Chair of the United Tribal Transboundary Mining Work Group, in the release.